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## A REVIVAL OF THE MEGALENSIAN GAMES

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The modern young person, though submerged temporarily in a classical atmosphere, is bound, sooner or later, to betray his modernity. The year had, on the whole, been one of serious effort in the Classical Club at Lewis Institute. Besides the Roman Dinner,<sup>1</sup> there had been two illustrated lectures on Greece and Rome, and monthly meetings at which were enacted scenes from classic myth—in short the club had engaged in every appropriate form of activity fitted to keep interest at the white heat. And now, as spring came on, there arose the universal demand for something that might seem more like fun and less like work. A party, a frolic, a dance! In vain we quoted Cicero's statement, "Nemo saltat nisi insanus aut inebrius." A party became inevitable. The time of the Megalensia was chosen, and then, as we groped for some form of entertainment not too much out of harmony with an ideal nor too great an antithesis to our dinner, someone boldly proposed that we celebrate the Megalensian Games.

To transform a great barnlike gymnasium into even a remote representation of the great Circus Maximus, was an appalling task. But while it involved considerable labor and some degree of ingenuity, the result was surprisingly satisfactory. Fortunately the dimensions of the floor space were relatively the same as in the Circus, though reduced to a one-thousandth, and, no doubt, we missed the glamor of foreign marbles and the blue of an Italian sky.

Opposite the entrance the wall was hung with a red curtain perhaps twenty feet wide, and against this rich background the imperial pulvinar was erected, high enough above the floor to be seen by all. It was also completely draped in dark red and decorated with statues of the gods, and contained the throne and

<sup>1</sup> Described in *School Review*, October, 1908.

seats for the Vestals, the priests, and other members of the court party. When they were in their places, this one detail was really a thing of beauty.

To wall the course and give it the proper elliptical shape, a barrier of boards was built and covered with gray carpet paper chalked to represent stonework. Behind this were arranged seats for the spectators. Down the center of the course ran a spina of the same pseudo-masonry, with metae at the ends and shrines bearing eggs to be taken down at each lap of the race. The carceres or stalls were at one end with the editor's box high above them.

There had been the usual excitement attending all performances of the Classical Club, and, as only two hundred tickets could be issued, everything was sold, and by seven o'clock the populace began to arrive. At 8:15 the Circus Maximus opened for business and the crowd filed into the cavea, each receiving at the door a banner of the color of which he was a partisan.

At 8:30 the heralds entered with grave dignity, and after the trumpet calls announced, "I call you to witness a sight which no man living ever saw and no man living will ever see again," a formula appropriate in ancient times only to the Saecular Games but literally true of our performance.

The procession, consisting of forty persons, entered and filed slowly around the Circus, halting before the imperial box while the court, the editor, and his attendants took their places. First came the heralds playing on trumpets, then the two lictors with their fasces, preceding the imperial chariot drawn by four spirited horses—where one is young, it takes only a gay bridle with tassels and tinsel and cockade to transform Bud Smith or Bill Jones into Bucephalus or Pegasus. The emperor, in his royal purple paludamentum, his golden crown, and unsmiling dignity, almost made one forget the semi-burlesque character of the occasion. The editor, a great imperial fellow in a white tunic and blue chlamys, was carried in a gray-draped litter on the shoulders of four sturdy slaves. He was followed by the charioteers in tunics of white, green, red, and blue respectively, driving horses caparisoned in the same colors. The chariots,

made in our own shops by the boys, were in size and form really fair models of the ancient racing car. They were equipped with heavy iron wheels which rumbled like thunder over the hollow gymnasium floor. After the chariots came the Vestals in white, then a band of priests carrying images of the gods, and, last of all, several citizens of high station.

When all were in their places, the charioteers drove up before the editor's box and cast lots, in due form, for position. Then they backed into the stalls and were ready to start. A slave was stationed at each of the metae to record the number of laps by taking down an egg from the shrines. The trumpet gave a blast, and after two dashes for position the editor dropped the mappa and the race was on.

It was one of the wildest sights I ever beheld. The horses threw themselves into the race with such fury that at the first turn one chariot was smashed to bits; one of the charioteers, thrown from his swerving car, disappeared temporarily through the paper masonry while his horses bolted wildly through the rest of the race with the empty chariot. By the fourth lap only two chariots were intact, and the course was strewn with wreckage. The audience was on its feet screaming with laughter and excitement, and not one but had caught enough of a thrill to realize what the circensian races meant to the Roman populace.

At the end of the race but a single battered chariot, with a wildly disheveled driver, was left in the course, and, as the survival of the fittest, he received the palm from the editor and the plaudits of the multitude.

When the splintered fragments had been cleared away, and the runaway steeds captured and driven out, a number of the athletes who have made Lewis famous gave exhibitions of wrestling and running. And then came the gladiators. Three pairs were conducted by the editor in his litter around the entire arena for inspection, halting before the imperial box to cry, "Hail, Caesar, emperor; we, about to die, salute thee!" There was first a myrmillo, heavily armed, and a retiarius with net and trident; second, a Gaul and a German, both in full armor, and last of all a gladiator and a bear. Then the adolescent instinct

for burlesque was given free play, and anything more amusing would be hard to find.

When the heartless multitude had, *pollice verso*, condemned the vanquished to death and the dead bodies had been dragged out in a very realistic manner, and the bloodstains sprinkled with sand, the successful combatants received their rewards at the hand of the emperor. The victors in the various contests then passed in review around the arena.

The recessional was made with great pomp, and contained all the participants except the gladiators who were beyond possible resurrection. As the imperial chariot rounded the spina, a Gallic gladiator who had waited for this moment broke from the ranks and aimed a murderous blow at his majesty. Confusion and excitement reigned and the lictors in an excess of zeal battered the would-be assassin over the head so vigorously that he displayed his bumps proudly for days to come.

As the pageant again formed and retired, his battered form, dragged limply between two slaves, formed a fitting tailpiece to this curious display of burlesque and grotesquerie.

Such were the Megalensian Games of 1906, and I have to record that in the remembrance of the *Cena* and the *Ludi* of that year, the "*ignobile volgus*" to this day demand still, as in Juvenal's day, "*Panes et Circenses*."